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Resistance Conservatism and Innovation

To Europeans of the nineteenth century, violence and conquest were inevitable features of colonialism. As we have seen, a man like Governor Hahl could dismiss repeated collisions with New Guineans as unavoidable in the continuing conflict between 'culture' and 'savagery'. In the Pacific, the German regimes confronted Island societies which had demonstrated emphatically their capacity to resist European interference. As a result, Samoans, Ponapeans and New Guineans were treated at various times with caution, as very real threats to the stability of the German Pacific empire. The object of the following chapter is to show that the Pacific Island answer to German rule ranged through varying degrees of accommodation and opposition, dictated by a wide variety of considerations, and only in a few isolated cases did it amount to rebellion against German hegemony.

The three Island societies with which we have been dealing were receptive to the presence of Europeans, and even to limited foreign suzerainty. Most Pacific societies found advantage and profit in the arrival of the white people, for they brought new metals, tools and skills, as well as strange and inviting ornament. Many of the earliest encounters with European explorers ended in bloodshed, but there were generally good reasons, either the pressure put upon scant area and food resources, or European ignorance of local custom.¹ Seldom was such conflict a case of simple, undefined tribal resistance, or of total and irreconcilable opposition to the whites and their ways.

Most societies made an effort to find the basis for a coexistence of mutual profit. Beach communities of resident Europeans flourished in all corners of the Pacific long before the Powers annexed their empires. Later colonists were also accepted, and, depending on their willingness to acknowledge local norms of belief and custom, an acceptable level of co-operation and exchange was usually worked out, as with the London Missionary Society in Samoa before 1900, or Ralum plantation in New Guinea before 1893.

Accommodation did not prevent the Pacific Islanders from attempting to bargain with a colonial regime, or from using limited

opposition as a political tactic to get their own way. In many cases the actions which Germans interpreted as laziness, deceit or wilful obstruction, were efforts by local elites to control change, to create a balance between new demands on the socio-political order and established patterns of political life, status and social solidarity. For example, to call the movement for a Samoan co-operative in 1904 'very little other than a manipulation of the Samoan national trait to periodically rise in political upheavals every five or ten years', as one later New Zealand administrator did,² is a myopic political judgment bordering on wilful prejudice. The *Oloa* movement was not a blind, irrational adventure, nor was it a simple economic response to shifts in the world market. Organised by the leading chiefs and speakers in Mulinu'u, its aim was to create a power base for these chiefs against the policies of the Governor, and to reinforce the *Malo's* traditional claims to authority; in other words, to restore the traditional system of political dynamics.

But to explain it as a conservative Samoan *response* designed to perpetuate old rights and freedoms is to see only one side of the coin. The *Oloa* was also an example of the creative realignment of institutions and behaviour patterns, of an endeavour to synthesise old values with the new. Through the *Oloa*, Samoan elites were trying to adapt the native copra industry to the vagaries of the world market. Copra production had been a critical feature of indigenous economic life for more than a decade. Throughout the entire German period Samoan plantings (covering more than fifty per cent of the planted area of the group) continued to supply the vast bulk of copra exported from Samoa; copra sales enabled the Samoans to pay head taxes and mission contributions regularly without having to resort to wage labour for Europeans. The importance of the industry explains why falling copra prices in 1903-04 should so concern many Samoans and attract them to the idea of their own co-operative. Samoans' commercial expectations may have been unrealistic, and their lack of expertise in the management of a co-operative would have been a liability at first, but neither of these impediments diminishes the imaginativeness of this attempt to update the Samoan copra industry in line with the fluctuations of a world market. In seeking to compete with modern European commerce in its own idiom, the *Cumpani* would have allowed Samoans to shape their economic life under colonial rule.

There are other, equally pertinent examples of constructive opposition in the German Pacific. One is the unrest which Nanpei engineered

on Ponape in 1908, designed at once to strengthen his own position in traditional society and yet to secure for Ponapeans, or at least for some Ponapeans, a greater share of political power under the Germans through Nanpei's 'advisory council'. In New Guinea, the Tolai people provide another case. They refused to be assimilated into a planters' wage-economy but, instead, enthusiastically developed a system of cash cropping which enabled them to rationalise copra production along Western lines.

The combination of progressive and conservative aims in these various ventures demonstrates what one historian in the African context has termed the 'ambiguity towards modernisation' manifested by the peoples of developing countries.³ The desire for European material goods, new technology and institutional improvements was balanced by distaste for many aspects of European laws, morality and living patterns. Conversion to Western values was not automatic, as many Europeans anticipated, nor was it complete. Rather, the history of colonial penetration shows that at different times, and according to their reading of the situation and the resources at their disposal, Pacific Islanders made conscious acts of selection and rejection of European culture.

Local choice becomes as important a category of explanation as European dynamism. Proto-co-operatives, advisory councils, cash cropping, payment of head taxes, even Cargo cults were all original responses to colonial rule. Yet there are as many convincing examples of the hold of tradition on societies undergoing social change: the Tolai refused to jettison shell money as a status indicator amongst themselves despite their immersion in a cash economy; the Ponapeans continued to make regular votive offerings to their High Chiefs even after the German reforms released them from the obligation and the sacrifices it entailed; all three societies refused to accept the European work ethic: only a handful of Melanesian labourers adopted wage labour as a permanent way of life during German times, and the Samoans looked on regular plantation work as fit only for serfs.

Sometimes such assertions of the right to contribute to a changing society took the form of militant discontent, even intimidation and force. But where the Germans refused to recognise Pacific Islanders, especially Pacific Island leaders, as political equals, no other course existed. There were no official organisations to express protest and opposition. Local government structures set up in each colony were designed to transmit executive orders to the people, and only inciden-

tally operated in the opposite direction. This was logical to the Germans. The primary concern of imperial administration was to encourage the economic productivity, not the political development of colonial populations; to create a prosperous peasantry in the employment of imperial designs. Thus any movement of dissent was defined as illegitimate. Moreover, because of the assumption that a subject people would automatically resist conquest, signs of opposition on the part of Pacific Islanders tended to be interpreted as wholesale rebellion against the very idea of German rule.

These, of course, were common reactions among late nineteenth century colonial regimes. Only with the era of decolonisation did the rhetoric change: colonial opposition movements became respectable and their aspirations towards independence were accepted as reasonable. But in German times, Pacific Islanders were forced to resort to expedients like the Vaimea incident, the *mau e pule*, the 1908 campaign in Ponape to try to frighten the regime into conceding some form of compromise. Resistance or opposition in this sense was merely an extension of ordinary political processes, a calculated tactic with limited objectives.

None of this is to deny that there *were* instances of rebellion against colonial subjection, of refusal to submit to the Germans. Herbertshöhe, Madang, the Varzin Mountains and the Baining Range were all the scenes of large-scale violence against whites in German New Guinea. As well, the situation in Ponape did produce finally what can only be termed a revolt.

To generalise about these protests is difficult because of the varying stages of colonial penetration and the widely differing historical circumstances in each area. By and large, they were the product of overwhelming frustration at German pretensions: the tendency to make demands and exploit resources without reference to those affected, or without offering some form of compensation. Many New Guinean groups, for instance, were prepared to accept German sovereignty on New Guinean terms. But they refused to admit the extreme assumptions of colonialism—that the colonies existed for unrestrained profit-making at the expense of their inhabitants. Europeans made revolutionary demands on New Guineans, depriving them of their land, requisitioning their labour, proscribing certain economic, religious and sexual customs. Yet, in return, they treated the people as an untouchable caste, restricted their freedom of action, and offered them only the most trivial compensation from the white people's vast material wealth.

At first glance, then, the history of race relations in German New Guinea, and the wider Pacific, would seem to be explained best in terms of social and economic deprivation, a sense of despair caused by 'an inability to obtain what the culture has defined as the ordinary satisfactions of life'.⁴ On closer analysis, however, the evidence suggests otherwise. 'Deprivation' is a relative term, depending very much on the horizon of expectations of the people concerned. In the Pacific, there is no simple correlation between the number and extent of demands made by the German administrations and the instances of rebellion. The nature of local response seems to depend on a 'cost-benefit analysis' by the leadership of each group, as well as on the compensating resources which the group possessed.

Ponape, for instance, was the severest test which the Germans had to face in the Pacific, yet the colony was not subject to the pressures of labour recruitment, excessive land alienation and a vocal white settler community which caused so much friction in other colonies. The disadvantages of the German land reforms to a chief like Henry Nanpei were far outweighed by the security he gained for his personal estates. In contrast are the repercussions which land reform had for lesser chiefs with fewer resources, especially for the chiefs of Sokehs district. They were the most vulnerable to German demands because, along with Net, they lived the closest to the seat of the German administration; therefore they had to bear the brunt of Boeder's crusade. Where the Ponapean 'commoners' stood during the successive crises is harder to evaluate, but their close links with section heads and district chiefs, plus the fact that they had everything to gain from the Germans' land changes, suggest that generally they played a passive role and followed where their chiefs led.

New Guineans experienced the hand of Germany unevenly, according to their proximity to major European settlements and the consequent ability of the regime to mobilise them in support of its demands. But even where the pattern of white settlement and administrative commands were similar, the response of the local populations varied significantly. What mattered were the alternative opportunities available to the local society. For example, the coastal Tolai of the Gazelle Peninsula and the Madang people on the mainland both suffered the loss of large scale land resources and had imposed upon them the obligations of direct German rule (*corvée* labour, head tax). The Tolai managed to reconcile themselves to this state of affairs after the war of 1893, for as a group they were strong and important enough

to be able to negotiate defined land reserves; moreover, the possession of an abundance of coconuts and good transport and marketing opportunities enabled them to enjoy an increasing cash income and a rising standard of living. For the Madang people, there were few if any compensations: most of their land had been lost in the expansion of company plantations, and they possessed too few saleable resources to provide the basis for a permanent trading economy; even wage labour gave them negligible purchasing power. It was the sort of situation, with no prospects for advancement through acceptance of the European order, which led logically to the physical resistance of 1904 and, perhaps, 1912.

This uneven effect of structural changes to economic or political life, or to social authority, is the model which prevailed in all three German colonies. The southern districts of Ponape, in contrast to Sokehs, accepted the German program of reforms voluntarily in 1909, although the traditional authority of chiefs was thereby reduced considerably and the only source of income for many chiefs through tributary labour was abolished. In Samoa, not all the chiefs affected by Solf's policy of diminishing chiefly influence and privileges followed Lauaki in his campaign to restore chiefly power. Some chose to collaborate and accept roles within Solf's new local government bureaucracy. Such men played an important part in the Lauaki crisis of 1908-09. Co-operating fully with the German government's counter-strategy, or weighing carefully the options open to them in the conflict, they gave Solf an important lever over the Samoan community and enabled the Islanders to avert civil war. New Guineans resisted the European invasion of trading monopolies which were established between coastal and inland groups and which were an important link in the static subsistence economies of both. And many reacted in a hostile manner to the depopulation of villages through recruiting, to the enforced relocation of settlements, such as at Madang and Herbertshöhe, or to the subversion of cults and social sanctions by missionaries. Yet other structural innovations, like *luluais* and the head tax, did not lead to widespread resistance, nor did recruitment and mission efforts to change the patterns of village life provoke violent clashes in all areas. This reinforces the argument that the term 'deprivation' must be used with caution in trying to explain the causes of Pacific Island opposition.

One of the self-evident causes was the overt racial arrogance of German planters, recruiters and administrators, and the abuses which sprang from it. The New Guinea Company's disciplinary ordinance of

1887-88 was quite explicit in treating the New Guinean as a brutish, almost subhuman savage, and its assumptions were not softened though the ordinance itself was 'improved' in later years. The record of continual desertions from plantations, of hostility to recruiters, and the prominence of ex-labourers in attacks on white people all testify to the resentment which the misuse of their labour aroused in New Guineans. The sense of racial and moral superiority which some missionaries wore like a badge also caused antagonism: the Baining massacre and the conspiracies against the Madang missionaries demonstrate that New Guineans would not lightly accept these pretensions either.

Ponape provides the best example of the emotions which German excesses could arouse. Boeder's constant disregard for Island sensibilities, from the time of his arrival to his murder in October 1910, points to a deliberate contempt for the Ponapeans as civilised people, which on Ponape with its troubled past and defiant record, was cause enough for violence. Yet, significantly, almost nine months elapsed between the time the new land and labour system was forced on Sokehs and the uprising in October. Resort to violence was in many cases due to the failure of the German regimes to respond to local protests against abuses and loss of resources. The Sokehs chiefs had made repeated attempts to mitigate the effects of Boeder's policy before their position became untenable. Similarly, in the case of the Varzin war in the Gazelle Peninsula, To Kilang, the 'big man', had tried avenues of non-violent protest without securing any review of his problem before taking matters into his own hands.

Beyond the external causes of Pacific Island opposition to German rule, whether physical or political, is another, less obvious, but equally important set of explanations. Often the actions which Germans interpreted as unprovoked aggression or rebellion were the result of social and political forces internal to the Island societies and largely independent of the Germans.

For example, violence against whites was occasionally the expression of traditional community sanctions. Europeans living in or near Island communities and entering into the local system of relationships were given short shrift if they violated taboos and canons of social behaviour. Several of the murders of lone traders in the New Guinea Islands before 1900 can be traced to this mistake; witness also the attack on Ralum

in 1890, which followed after Europeans had repeatedly ignored the importance to the Tolai of local cult centres and fishing areas.

In New Guinea the practice of 'blood revenge' or 'pay back' was also responsible for a share of European deaths. In cases where a New Guinean descent group or residential unit considered that it had been seriously wronged by another social group with which it had no close ties, then any member of the latter group was liable to be attacked in retaliation, either physically or by sorcery. On occasions, a white was murdered if a group had suffered from the visit of an earlier European, or if the visit coincided with the death of a group member. This group solidarity also operated in the Sokehs rebellion in Ponape; in fact, it was the primary, if temporary, force which rallied the people of Sokehs behind Soumadau in the fight against Germany.

Fear of the outsider was another factor which influenced the behaviour of New Guinea village groups towards Europeans. In the days before contact, most New Guineans lived in small, highly integrated and self-sufficient residential groups, each suspicious of its neighbours and treating the intrusion of any stranger as a possible threat to the delicate balance of its existence. Attacks against advancing Europeans were usually initiated at this level rather than at the regional level, and they were often intended, however unnecessarily, as acts in defence of the residential group. The murder of Dammköhler west of the Markham in 1909, and of Richards, the Bird of Paradise hunter, in 1910 can best be explained in this way. European explorers and travellers also affronted villagers by their insensitive curiosity about peoples' living habits, and their frequent failure to observe the proper decorum in villages. Traditionally, even friends and allies not belonging to the territorial unit were objects of distrust, for New Guineans feared the sorcery and trouble which might result from non-residents learning the intimate details of their lives.

A variation on the theme of internal causes of resistance is to see opposition to the Germans as an extension of the balance of power among local groups. The relationship between various descent, residential or district units was often the key to the way Pacific Islanders handled Europeans. One of the dangers of interpreting Pacific history from European records is to see that history in terms of a simple involvement between Pacific Islanders on the one hand and Europeans on the other. In reality, the involvement frequently took the form of an encounter among several local groups pursuing their traditional purposes (whether war, alliances or exchanges), in which Europeans were

only one variable in the equation, and one to be manipulated in pursuit of traditional aims. Often an event interpreted by contemporary observers as a crisis in the relationship between the colonial regime and the Island people was in fact an episode in the changing patterns of conflict and alliance among indigenous groups.

The history of Ponape under German rule makes this evident. The sequence of threat and counter-threat, of clandestine meetings and raids on chiefs' property which Georg Fritz in 1908 thought was an attempted *putsch* against his regime was a chapter in the struggle between the two chiefs of Kiti, Henry Nanpei and Sou Kiti, which carried over to their relations with the Germans. As we have seen, Nanpei skilfully managed the confusion that resulted from his deliberate provocations, with the dual intention of intimidating Fritz while enlisting his support against Sou Kiti. Regional jealousies also played an important part in the uprising of 1910: the chiefs of Sokehs suspected that the German land reforms were Nanpei's inspiration and that he had formed an alliance with the Germans against the northern districts; Fritz's approval of Nanpei's 'advisory council', as well as Boeder's general aggressiveness, seemed only to confirm their suspicions.

If we turn our attention to Samoa, the *mau e pule* immediately presents itself as an extension of the factional intrigues which had long riven Samoan politics. Alongside the restoration of *Tumua* and *Pule* to their old positions of influence, Lauaki aimed to entrench his own faction in power under the Germans, and it was Solf's recognition of this which enabled him to split the mass front Lauaki had so carefully organised during 1908. The Lauaki crisis then developed along the lines of a uniquely Samoan party struggle; the 'declaration of war' which Lauaki made in January 1909 was directed less at the Germans than at Lauaki's Samoan enemies, the chiefs of *Tumua*.⁵

New Guinea provides perhaps the most diverse set of examples of the same process, though they are seldom recognised as such in the government records of the time. To take just two cases: mission reports and later local additions make it plain that what Hahl regarded as an infringement of colonial peace and order in the Admiralties, when Pominis led his village in a retaliatory raid on his neighbours, was in reality an expression of their long-standing hostility, with no suggestion of rebellion. Two years later, the people of Valum village on Pak Island killed the three Solomon Islands labourers who had murdered their employer Schlehan and retired to Pak Island with the booty. The

incident initially was considered rough justice by the regime, and the turning point in the long and bitter struggle which had been carried on since the 1880s to pacify the Admiralty Islanders. But a later patrol discovered that the 'rough justice' was not justice at all; that in fact the Valum people had killed the labourers because the neighbouring village of Mogara had given the refugees shelter, and shared in the plunder from Schlehan's trading station.⁶ Too afraid of government punishment to participate in the pillage themselves, the Valum people had acted out of jealousy of their neighbours.

In spite of these local cultural explanations of Pacific Island 'resistance', a warning must be entered against rationalising away every act of violence in which Europeans and Pacific Islanders were involved. On the New Guinea frontier, at least, avarice led to many of the attacks on whites. In an area like New Ireland before 1900, where traders were isolated and left in charge of large caches of trade goods, the temptation to plunder often proved too great for villagers. The same was true of the Solomons and the Admiralties, where off-shore Islanders were particularly adept at pirating European vessels. There were always groups, even friendly to the administration, who were prepared to indulge in looting, as with Mogara village on Pak Island, or the Tolai district of Malaganan in the attack on Wolff's house in 1902.

Exasperation at the readiness of New Guineans to appropriate anything left lying around is a major theme in many accounts of colonial pioneering. The Reverend Flierl recounts how the Sattelberg people in the Huon Peninsula brazenly warned him to guard his possessions closely, for they were considered fair booty if only the villagers could get their hands on them. Flierl also claimed that the covetousness of the Simbang people could easily have led to murder at Finschhafen in the early days.⁷

The desire for European material wealth, and the violence such desires could generate were not necessarily anti-German or anti-European. With very few exceptions, and all of them in New Guinea, none of the uprisings against German rule or expressions of hostility to it can be classified as the total rejection of Europeans and their civilisation. There may have been present a longing for a simpler past, with the certainties of the old ways, but Pacific Islanders were not committed to reaction for its own sake, nor, necessarily, were their actions designed to overthrow the colonial regime. Campaigns like the Samoan *Oloa* movement, and Lauaki's *man e pule* took the framework of colonial rule as established, and sought rather to manipulate its

institutions and reduce its effects. There is no proof that Lauaki intended open rebellion when he began his fight for *Tumua* and *Pule* in 1908; indeed, Lauaki consistently denied any such purpose.⁸ Perhaps to defend Lauaki as being essentially loyal throughout the affair, as did Solf's district officer in Savai'i,⁹ was going too far. The movement had generated its own momentum. Schultz's action in prohibiting the demonstration on Solf's arrival frustrated Lauaki's strategy, reducing his options and virtually forcing him openly to oppose the administration or to back down. But, even after events became explosively rebellious, with *Tumua* lining up against Lauaki, there exists little evidence to prove that Lauaki sought an open break with the regime, or that he intended using violence against the whites in Samoa. The compromise which Lauaki so masterfully engineered at Vaiusu, plus the fact that he surrendered in the end to save Samoa from war, suggest that Lauaki was reluctant to cross the thin line between intimidation and physical violence.

In New Guinea, major insurrections occurred in only a few areas, and even then they were usually aimed against specific grievances and lasted a short time. For instance, considering the economic advantages which coastal Tolai gained from the growth of the plantation markets before 1893, it is doubtful whether the war of the bullet-proof ointment was intended to annihilate all Europeans living in the Gazelle Peninsula. Since peace persisted so strongly after 1893, more likely it was intended to ease pressure on Tolai land, and restore the earlier, more favourable relationship of coexistence and mutual economic benefit with the whites. The Baining massacre in 1904 was not a general anti-white movement either. Planned and executed by a small group of Baining people, it was aimed specifically against the Sacred Heart Mission and the personalities responsible for the humiliations of St Paul. In the rampage that followed the murders, the rebels left alone a white settler living in the area, who was married to a New Guinean woman.¹⁰

Even at Madang, where the people were twice accused of plotting to destroy the European community, there is a case for arguing that the so-called 1912 rebellion was actually an expression of the Cargo beliefs that were circulating in Madang villages, where people were discussing whether the time had come to expel the whites who were responsible for the loss of village land, but to embrace the 'white' way of life.¹¹

Finally, when we turn to Ponape and the Sokehs rebellion, it is clear that even the militantly independent Ponapeans had never excluded the idea of compromise with Europeans. They met the original Spanish

demands readily enough, and it is likely that all the districts would have submitted to the Germans' decrees but for the brutality of Carl Boeder. That right up to the moment of rebellion there existed a party of Sokehs leaders which opposed such a Draconian solution indicates that, almost always, someone was ready to compromise with the Germans; any determination to destroy German rule, if it existed, was only lukewarm.

The Sokehs uprising is best interpreted as an explosion of frustration against Boeder and his accomplices by the district which suffered most from his tyranny. 'We felt wretched and furious and we did not much think . . .',¹² was the judgment of Samuel, the last of the rebel chiefs to give himself up. Resistance ebbed rapidly once the German forces arrived, and the Sokehs warriors surrendered quietly. Moved by the sense of fate that predestined their destruction, Samuel conceded the struggle to the Germans 'so that our souls would be tranquil'. This is decidedly not the cloth from which fanatical liberation movements are cut.

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